

# Community Rail Network – evidence to Welsh Government’s Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee

## Introduction and about us

**Community Rail Network** is a not-for-profit organisation working across Britain to support, champion and represent community rail: a growing, thriving grassroots movement that works to engage communities with their railways, and ensure local people benefit from railways and stations.

This growing movement now includes 75 community rail partnerships (CRPs) and c. 1,200 station friends’ groups and other local groups, spread across Britain. These are community-based and -led groups and organisations, working closely with the rail industry, to:

- Enhance the railways’ contribution to local sustainable development and community wellbeing, including by maximising access to and use of the railways;
- Ensure the community has a voice and plays a part in the development and improvement of our railways, so this meets community needs and aspirations and delivers maximum benefit;
- Communicate the development and importance of our railways to communities, enhancing understanding and pride, and promoting rail as a key part of sustainable, healthy travel.

There are currently five community rail partnerships across Wales & Borders. Further development is underway, including a new partnership for the Valleys region, supported by ourselves and Transport for Wales (TfW). There are also more than 140 station groups across Wales & Borders, meaning more than 50% of the network is 'adopted' by local volunteers, with plans in progress between ourselves and TfW to further extend and strengthen this part of the movement.

This growth and development in community rail reflects the commitment to facilitate the emergence of new community rail partnerships in the Wales and Borders rail services agreement and aligns with wider Welsh Government policy priorities to enable sustainable, inclusive travel and recognising the role of communities and the third sector in this.

Community Rail Network receives annual funding from TfW to support and lead development of community rail in Wales, and we’re additionally funded by the Department for Transport (DfT) and a range of other rail and government partners. We are also the lead delivery partner for the DfT’s Community Rail Development Strategy, which is adopted by the Welsh Government.<sup>1</sup>

Find out more about our work, and our members, at [communityrail.org.uk](https://communityrail.org.uk).

## Our comments and insights on the Committee’s key themes

### **Theme 1: Metro schemes and franchise commitments**

1.1 The major investment in the Metro schemes, and the improved services this will hopefully lead to, is welcomed. We are very pleased to be helping a new CRP to get set up in the Valleys area, which has been in a process of ongoing development over recent years to ensure it is well rooted

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<sup>1</sup> Under this strategy we help CRPs and station groups to develop, grow, and deliver impact under four pillars: sustainable and healthy travel; providing a voice for communities; local economic development; and diversity and inclusion. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/community-rail-development-strategy>

in local communities and well positioned to help those communities derive greater value from the enhanced local network.

- 1.2 However, progression of the Metro schemes has resulted in disruption to existing routes, with some lines, e.g. Treherbert, closed for up to 12 months. This has resulted in some public negativity and a loss of confidence in rail in the affected areas, which will need to be rebuilt. We know community rail can support this process, given its place within communities, its ability to bring together local people and partners, to align with local values, and create pride and positivity. The movement has a solid track record in promoting and widening use of rail as a sustainable, healthy, inclusive, and sociable form of travel that enhances opportunity and mobility: a raft of qualitative evidence shows its success, and passenger data shows consistently stronger passenger growth on lines with CRPs over a ten year-period pre-pandemic, and stronger recovery of patronage post-pandemic.<sup>2 3</sup> We look forward to continuing to closely support the new Valleys CRP, and stepping up our support and leadership of station adoption in Wales, to enable community rail to play the fullest possible role in building and rebuilding positivity, pride, confidence, and propensity to use rail and public transport generally across the Valleys.
- 1.3 We note in the National Transport Delivery Plan 2022 - 2027 (NTDP) that the Metro areas are to act as development sites for projects and activities to encourage modal shift and integrated journey planning. Again, this is an area where community rail can make a crucial and unique impact, which could be significantly enhanced in Wales with our support, as the community rail movement expands and drawing on the growing wealth of good practice elsewhere. Our report on community rail and modal shift<sup>4</sup> highlights an array of activity improving integration with buses, active travel, community transport and shared mobility, and promoting green end-to-end journeys. 'Connected Stations',<sup>5</sup> our resource on community-led station travel planning, sets out in more detail how community-led, empowering initiatives to improve modal integration can take shape, and contains numerous examples of this. These include schemes where community rail has acted as a conduit in bringing different modes together to create more attractive, coherent, and affordable end-to-end journeys (e.g. multi-modal ticketing), as well as physical infrastructure improvements (e.g. foot path improvements and bus/rail interchange), and sometimes projects plugging the gaps, led by local needs (e.g. new bus services to local attractions that meet passengers off the train). In our experience, taking a participatory and empowering approach to such schemes increases the likelihood that projects securing local support and awareness, as they are community-owned and led, and aligning closely with local needs and aspirations. Supporting these types of initiatives and sharing good practice is a key part of our role at Community Rail Network, and an area of work we have been stepping up. We would be pleased to provide strategic advice to TfW on this topic, as well as supporting delivery on the ground.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/ACoRP-Value-of-Community-Rail-2019-final-for-web-141019.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/community-rail-supporting-rail-passenger-numbers-to-bounce-back/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Community-rail-encouraging-and-enabling-modal-shift.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Connected-stations-a-guide-to-community-led-station-travel-planning.pdf>

## Theme 2: Rail infrastructure priorities

### Stations

- 2.1 The role of community rail in enhancing stations is recognised in the Welsh Government's National Transport Delivery Plan (NTDP) 2022 to 2027, and helped by our support and expertise, community rail partnerships and station friends' groups have spearheaded, run, or played a part in many station-based initiatives across Wales & Borders. These have included projects with community partners such as social enterprises, community interest companies, arts organisations, repair cafes, foodbanks, and local money advisory services. Examples of good practice include: a community enterprise hub at Llandudno Station, which offers training and support for local people seeking to access employment opportunities; an active travel/bike hub at Newtown Station; and a community garden and artwork at Swansea Station.
- 2.2 We welcome TfW's efforts to ensure meaningful community engagement is used to shape plans and designs for new stations, and would welcome an increasing role for ourselves on advising on this at a strategic level, as well as our members supporting and spearheading delivery on the ground. Our experience within community rail indicates that strong local partnerships and a community-led approach is key to integrating stations into their communities and surroundings, creating a strong sense of ownership, and bolstering their use and usefulness. This should typically involve working with local authorities, businesses, and community groups, drawing on local ideas and involvement, and putting the community and its identity centre-stage. Where there is a community rail partnership, they can be facilitated and supported to lead this convening and local engagement, so it is by the community and not just for the community. This ethos was central to South West Wales Connected CRP's work in coordinating 'shared vision' meetings for stations in their area, bringing interested parties together to co-create priorities and action plans for stations and their surrounding communities, businesses, and organisations.
- 2.3 Another common aspect of community-led station projects that bring the station into the heart of communities and local economies is work to improve modal integration, to facilitate low-carbon and healthy end-to-end journeys (see section 1.3 above). We are stepping up our support with members in this area, including the provision of dedicated funding for such projects via our integrated sustainable transport in community rail fund. Further development of this activity in Wales & Borders would support the principle in the Welsh Government Policy Priorities for Wales and Borders Rail Services agreement, that opportunities to improve integration with other modes should be maximised. It also supports two of the main priorities set out in Llywybr Newydd: the Wales transport strategy 2021,<sup>6</sup> to facilitate modal shift away from private car use to more sustainable transport modes, and to encourage people to change their travel behaviours to use low-carbon, sustainable transport.
- 2.4 In community rail we have hundreds of examples of communities working with the rail industry to breathe new life into stations and their surrounding areas. These include projects to restore and make use of disused rooms, buildings, or spaces. It also includes activities to simply help communities make greater use of their stations, bringing people together through activities such as community gardening in outside spaces, arts and heritage projects displaying local works,

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.wales/llwybr-newydd-wales-transport-strategy-2021-html#65094>

community events and celebrations, and station-based volunteering.<sup>7 8</sup> While some activities may not be applicable at new stations (e.g. taking advantage of disused space), station adoption and its broad aim to ensure communities get the most from their local station, is certainly relevant, and emphasises how community-driven activities can create an improved relationship with the railway and enable the community to derive greater benefit from rail assets. Such benefits include making stations more welcoming and inclusive, improving access and connectivity, increasing footfall, reducing anti-social behaviour, and delivering wider social and environmental value. Despite these benefits, the processes involved in developing community-led station projects can be fraught and drawn out, with even fairly small, low-cost, and obvious improvements sometimes falling by the wayside, wasting local efforts and enthusiasm. As such, we are working with partners including GBRTT, Network Rail, and DfT to advise on common challenges and blockers to such projects to ensure opportunities are not missed, and we would be happy to feed in further to TfW on this topic at a strategic level.

2.5 The NTDP also commits support towards expanding the number of station adopters in Wales & Borders. We are working closely with TfW to facilitate this, encouraging an approach that embraces the multi-faceted benefits of station adoption, beyond just basic reporting and station upkeep/maintenance. Station adoption enhances the health and wellbeing of volunteers, improves the sustainability, development, and cohesion of wider communities, and promotes the railway and how it serves its passengers.<sup>9</sup> We would encourage rail industry and government partners to proactively encourage and support community rail and station adoption activity, and to have the scope, flexibility, and mindset to be open to new approaches from the community, and enable communities to lead the way on such projects, to maximise value and impact.<sup>10</sup> We support more than 300 station group members in England via expert advice, training, funding, and guidance on how they can take an outcomes-based approach to demonstrate social value and make their activities as impactful, inclusive, and successful as possible.<sup>11</sup> We are aiming to work with TfW to be more involved with station adoption groups across Wales & Borders, engaging a greater number of people in this strand of the community rail movement.

2.6 The development expansion of the station adoption movement in Wales could result in significantly enhanced impact in regard to biodiversity, as has already been demonstrated via TfW's 'green routes' project.<sup>12</sup> Community rail in England is playing an increasing role in enhancing environmental sustainability via biodiversity, nature-friendly gardening, and wildlife projects, developing stations as green spaces offering multiple benefits to communities and ecosystems.<sup>13</sup> There is scope for us to share this good practice with new and existing station groups in Wales, pending our greater involvement with this part of the Welsh movement. We have supported many station groups in activities including nurturing wildlife habitats, developing

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<sup>7</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Community-stations-innovative-community-uses-for-railway-stations-and-land.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Station-adoption-a-guide-for-the-local-community.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/The-value-of-community-rail.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Community-stations-innovative-community-uses-for-railway-stations-and-land.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Station-adoption-and-community-projects-using-an-outcomes-based-approach.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://tfw.wales/about-us/sustainable-development/projects/green-routes>

<sup>13</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Community-rail-and-biodiversity.pdf>

green spaces, encouraging sustainable communities, and using nature projects as a way of engaging young people and marginalised groups. This could be an area of growth if station adoption can be developed and progressed.

## **Electrification**

- 3.1 We support any proposed electrification of railways where it's viable, including the North Wales main line, as this allows for more rail journeys to be made by more sustainable means. Faster journey times may also allow for more frequent services, and therefore capacity improvements.
- 3.2 CRPs in Wales and Borders are supportive of a progressive electrification programme, highlighting the benefits in terms of enhancing sustainable travel and modernising the network. This is not only for the North Wales main line, but for routes elsewhere across the region, particularly as Wales & Borders will seemingly not now feel any direct benefits from HS2. However, the Conwy Valley and North West Wales Coast CRP are clear that any potential electrification of the North West Wales main line would need to be accompanied by rolling stock investment for the full benefits to be realised. This is based on the still-new class 197 diesel units being seen as the staple on the route for the foreseeable future. This CRP also raises capacity as an issue that may not be resolved solely by electrification, describing insufficient capacity as a major issue on through services into North Wales serving destinations such as Llandudno, Bangor, and Holyhead.

## **Accessibility**

- 4.1 Accessibility is highlighted as an infrastructure priority in the NTDP, and is also a theme running throughout Llwybr Newydd. The latter has the aim of an equitable and accessible transport system where barriers to sustainable mobility are removed, including physical, attitudinal, and environmental. This is another area where, with our support, community rail partnerships and groups across Britain are playing a leading role in supporting and enabling accessible and inclusive journeys and stations, and we believe more could be achieved in Wales.<sup>14</sup>
- 4.2 With regards to stations, our recent report on community rail and inclusive and accessible travel<sup>15</sup> shows how community rail partnerships and groups are: making stations physically accessible to those with a disability or impairment; creating more inclusive and welcoming environments that encourage social interactions; and coordinating inclusive volunteering. Examples include enhancing station facilities to widen rail access and assist those with non-visible disabilities, e.g. adapted signage/timetables, and accessible station displays that promote a sense of welcome and inclusivity, e.g. BSL artwork. Such projects make stations places a community can feel proud of and have a sense of ownership towards, which in turn may widen access to rail travel by encouraging people to see rail as a part of their lives.
- 4.3 Community rail is also making a profound, crucial difference to people's lives by enabling accessible, inclusive journeys and preventing isolation, opening up rail travel to those with a wide range of physical and non-visible disabilities and other support needs. Community rail

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<sup>14</sup> ibid

<sup>15</sup><https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Inclusive-and-accessible-travel.pdf>

partnerships and groups are increasing travel confidence and supporting rail journeys, and in some cases repeated rail use, for people living with dementia, autism, and mental health conditions, promoting independence, and broadening social mobility. There are some excellent examples of this across Wales & Borders, including Conwy Valley and North West Wales Coast CRP's Walking for Wellbeing project,<sup>16</sup> which supports those with mental health issues, and South West Wales Connected CRP's 'Joy of the Journey' project, which promotes rail confidence to help tackle social isolation. The more we can work with TfW to empower the community rail partnerships to engage and be led by local needs, as well as sharing good practice across the movement, the more we will see impactful, often life-changing initiatives in this area.

- 4.4 Community rail's local knowledge, and relationships with other community groups, is vital in making these initiatives a success, with our evidence indicating that impact is enhanced when projects are built on genuine involvement and shaped by those with lived experience. Community rail can help to facilitate creative, holistic approaches that bring people together, providing a voice to and empowering marginalised groups. Therefore the community rail movement can offer valuable insights in this area of infrastructure and policy development, and should be called upon appropriately to offer their contacts and expertise. Again, while our members can deliver work and bring their insights and contributions at a local level, we as community rail's umbrella body can offer expertise at a more strategic level, and we would be pleased to strengthen our role working with TfW in this regard.

### **TfW rail performance**

- 5.1 To increase rail patronage, we need to widen its use among parts of the population that seldom or never use rail at present. Community rail experience shows that for many people rail is another world: something unfamiliar, that wouldn't enter day-to-day considerations, and which may be a daunting prospect. To help to overcome this, the kind of localised engagement, relationship building, and dialogue typified by community rail is crucial, e.g. try the train trips, railway confidence building, awareness-raising activities of the enjoyment and benefits of rail travel. However, even to maintain current passenger levels, basic expectations of rail performance such as reliability also need to be met. Without this, it becomes harder for community rail to play its crucial role, and for the railway to increase its modal share.
- 5.2 On the Heart of Wales Line, the CRP describes performance and quality of service on the line in recent years as 'poor.' They state that trains have been cancelled for a multitude of different reasons, including staff shortages, rolling stock issues, infrastructure failures and delays in previous trains. Given the line's low frequency timetable, they feel it can suffer from a lack of priority when such issues arise. The CRP is hopeful that the introduction of Active Travel carriages in 2024 will alleviate some of the rolling stock issues as trains will always have two powered cars, making breakdowns less prevalent. However, they feel further work around predicting staff shortages would be helpful, and for the line to be given a higher priority when shortages occur.

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<sup>16</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/case-studies/walking-for-wellbeing-conwy-valley-and-north-west-wales-coast-crp/>

- 5.3 On the Conwy Valley and North West Wales Coast lines, the CRP states that while there have been performance issues, there have been improvements in recent times. However, there is still an ongoing issue with capacity on the North Wales Coast main line, related to services terminating at Chester, with passengers transferring onto already full onward services into North Wales.
- 5.4 South West Wales Connected CRP said there were mixed feelings across the South West Wales region regarding travel/trains and issues on the line. Some people were delighted with the service they had received and the ease of travel, while others had experienced delays/cancellations which could lead to very negative comments. The CRP said the impact on rail confidence and negativity towards the railway could be minimised via improved travel options in the event of delays/cancellations, and more effective communication when such situations occur.
- 5.5 3 Counties Connected CRP said many people within their local communities have a lack of confidence in rail travel due to reliability issues, and work is especially needed to improve integrated transport to redress this, e.g. closer alignment between rail/bus timetables. Issues around reliability were also raised with regards to services on the Cambrian Line, with capacity also a major problem.

### **Passenger impact(s)**

- 6.1 From our experience, we know that when community rail partnerships and groups are not confident in being able to promote reliable and regular services on the lines they cover, this can lead to decreased motivation and morale, and a feeling that they need to scale back some types of activities. This especially relates to activities overtly promoting rail use, due to worries about negative perceptions, wasted efforts, and potentially putting themselves in the firing line.
- 6.2 Some CRPs across Wales & Borders have said that poor performance has led to negativity on social media, particularly around certain lines/services, with significant performance issues since the pandemic. The Heart of Wales Line CRP said they found it difficult to promote anything related to the train service on their social media channels as it tends to be met with negative comments. Such worries have been echoed by South West Wales Connected, who said that consistently poor service could erode public trust in the railways and affect the reputation of the CRP itself, meaning people would be less likely to view its wider activities, efforts and impacts in a positive manner and have trust in its campaigns and messaging.
- 6.3 A type of activity particularly affected by poor and unreliable rail services (and which has a keen bearing on Welsh transport policy priorities) is community rail's promotion rail as a form of sustainable travel, and a genuine alternative to the private car. We know that promoting rail use, in conjunction with other forms of public transport, active, and shared travel, is key to decarbonising transport and tackling the climate emergency, and across the community rail movement activities to promote rail and break down barriers have ramped up considerably over the years.<sup>17</sup> But in Wales & Borders, despite the strong political commitments, there are signs that the CRPs don't always have the confidence in the service they are promoting to play their

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<sup>17</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Community-rail-encouraging-and-enabling-modal-shift.pdf>

role fully. This is a wasted opportunity, given the cost effectiveness of community rail, and its unique and trusted position within communities enabling it to carry out impactful, empowering engagement that aligns perfectly with evidence on how behaviour change can take shape.<sup>18</sup> We would be pleased to feed in further to TfW how the CRPs can be enabled to play this role more strongly, both by listening to their views and concerns as a voice for communities, and supporting them to deliver locally led modal shift campaigns and projects.

6.4 CRPs with infrequent services, such as the Heart of Wales Line, have said that it is problematic to try to plan activities promoting sustainable travel as just one train cancellation could leave a group stranded and reliant on alternative arrangements, such as rail replacement bus services. This is a particular issue on this line, which has the potential to be a show-stopper centrepiece of the Welsh network, bringing tourists from far and wide. As is the case with other iconic lines in Britain such as Settle-Carlisle and the West Highland Line, it could be an attraction in its own right and a gateway to stunning landscapes and hidden gems across a large swathe of the country. The CRP has existing activities and aspirations that could bolster this, such as the Heart of Wales Line Trail,<sup>19</sup> but the impact of this work is greatly diminished if the service cannot be relied upon.

6.5 More than one CRP said that in the event of train delays/cancellations, the reliability and effective communication of alternative travel arrangements had proved an issue, with examples of people being left stuck on a remote rural platform for several hours, and one CRP having to arrange lifts to and from different stations so people could take part in a rail trail walk. This issue is compounded, particularly in rural areas, by a lack of integrated transport options and connectivity, e.g. rail to bus links and safe active travel routes.

### **Opportunities for community rail to make an impact**

7.1 Despite performance issues, CRPs in Wales & Borders remain resolute in their belief that community rail can connect communities with their local lines and stations and amplify their voices in developing rail services that fit their wants and needs. The diverse nature of their activities means they support communities in a broad range of ways, helping to fulfil the seven key goals of The Well-being of Future Generations Act, such as increased community cohesion, improved health and wellbeing, and a more equitable society.

7.2 Although poor levels of confidence and negative public perceptions are affecting some lines, some CRPs did say that their lines had a 'special place' in the hearts of the communities they serve, and as such, that confidence in the railway could be regenerated, building on that affection. Community rail has a vital role to play in doing this, while delivering effective community development work and bolstering socio-economic development. Community Rail Network's evidence of community rail delivering impact in diverse localities across Britain shows

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<sup>18</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/switching-to-sustainable-transport-a-rapid-evidence-assessment?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm\\_source=3f96f245-b190-45d3-8365-8cdcc780597a&utm\\_content=daily](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/switching-to-sustainable-transport-a-rapid-evidence-assessment?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_source=3f96f245-b190-45d3-8365-8cdcc780597a&utm_content=daily)

<sup>19</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/case-studies/heart-of-wales-line-trail-heart-of-wales-line-development-company/>



how much can be achieved, often with life-changing impacts for individuals and regenerative effects for their localities.<sup>20</sup>

7.3 A key theme among CRPs across Wales & Borders is a commitment to promoting and supporting sustainable tourism and leisure travel by rail. Community rail is brilliantly positioned to play a critical part in this, with its ability to draw on local knowledge, stories, and histories, to get people excited about using rail and offer up itineraries, trails, and inter-modal opportunities. We were delighted to see the 'Wales on Rails' project highlighted in the NTDP as an example of what can be delivered in partnership with the third sector to encourage and enable sustainable travel across Wales & Borders. This collaboration between various CRPs and heritage railways, also promoting other forms of public transport, is an excellent example of what can be done to promote sustainable days out and whole holiday itineraries.<sup>21</sup> However, again if services cannot be relied upon to meet these itineraries, especially where inter-modal/service interchange is needed in more remote areas, these opportunities break down, and community rail partnerships and groups risk losing trust and damaging the positive reputations they need to be effective.

7.4 This issue was also mentioned to us by CRPs in relation to their work with people who face additional barriers to rail travel, e.g. people with physical or non-visible disabilities, or those affected by loneliness and/or health and wellbeing issues. Again, such schemes can be undermined by poor and inconsistent rail services as participants, particularly those low in travel confidence, can easily be put off by a negative rail experience.

7.5 Finally, the CRPs fed into us that, as a publicly owned network, they felt there was an opportunity to develop a service that is clearly and evidently run for the people of Wales. They feel it is imperative that people are listened to in terms of what they want from their rail services, and, given community rail's role to provide a voice for communities on rail, they have a key part to play. Some CRPs said that for this to happen more effectively, they would benefit from easier, more effective ways to engage with and feed into decision and policy makers. They also said those decision makers needed to focus on high-quality service provision regardless of political or administrative boundaries, ensuring communities and their needs come first. Community Rail Network is working hard to facilitate this type of dialogue and engagement, e.g. by coordinating quarterly meetings between the CRPs and TfW and generally in the support and advice we provide encouraging a collaborative approach between the CRPs, TfW and other rail partners, with community rail and the communities treated as partners in rail's development. We would be happy to explore how our existing activities and partnership working with TfW can be further built on, to ensure the CRPs are fully empowered as independent, knowledgeable, and valuable partners, with their insights drawn on continuously at local, operational, and strategic levels.

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<sup>20</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/The-value-of-community-rail.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> <https://communityrail.org.uk/case-studies/wales-on-rails-tourism-project-great-little-trains-of-wales-and-the-community-rail-partnerships-in-wales-borders/>